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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 000143

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SUBJECT: INTELLECTUALS' DEBATE CONTINUES

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Classified By: Chief of Mission Michael Parmly for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: The unprecedented debate among Cuban intellectuals prompted by the reappearance of three 1970s censors on Cuban state television (refs a, b) continued to build momentum in the last few weeks. A January 18 statement by the government-run Union of Artists and Writers (UNEAC) did not end the debate, as hundreds of intellectuals joined the email exchange. The regime could not ignore the protest, and Culture Minister Abel Prieto held several meetings with disgruntled intellectuals. Outspoken literary critic Desiderio Navarro, who has emerged the protest's ringleader, organized a January 29 eight-hour marathon debate, in the presence of regime officials, among 450 artists and intellectuals. Those not invited to attend, including younger generation intellectuals, protested their exclusion. The Cuban intelligentsia saw the meeting as the beginning, not the end of the discussion, and continued to call for more debate on freedom of cultural expression. End Summary.

2.(C) UNEAC's January 18 statement in support of the intellectuals, published in government daily *Granma* under the caption *The Cultural Policy of the Revolution is Irreversible*, failed to end the furious debate over the reappearance of the 1970s censors, as the regime might have hoped (ref b). Email exchanges among hundreds of intellectuals, both inside and outside of Cuba, continued unabated. A series of meetings among intellectuals and audiences with Culture Minister Prieto culminated in a January 29 mega-meeting organized by writer Desiderio Navarro at the Theoretical Cultural Criteria Center. In the presence of Prieto and other regime officials, and with 450 writers and artists in attendance, Cuban intellectuals openly criticized the doctrinaire cultural policy of 1970s *grey* five years (which some describe as the *black decade*) and opposed any attempt to limit cultural expression. Noting that the *dinosaur* had been re-awakened, essayist Ambrosio Fornet provided a historical reckoning of the 1970s *grey* period in his opening remarks. Under the direction of the former censor, Luis Pavon Tamayo, the imposition of cultural dogmatism from 1971-1975 led to repression of Cuban intellectuals, some of whom were sent to re-education camps while many others were marginalized for their non-Orthodox views, religious beliefs or lifestyle choices, Fornet recounted. The present discussion of the *grey* period he concluded, also projects forcefully into the future.

against the danger of history being repeated.

3.(C) An open dialogue ensued for eight hours (truncated only by the airing of the latest video of Fidel Castro that same evening), according to writer Reynaldo Gonzales, and a broad consensus emerged that any return to the grey period would be stopped. He characterized the debate as a &turning point.⁸

A USINT contact present at the meeting told us that some participants raised larger issues of freedom of expression. Not everyone was able to participate in this invitation-only event, however, and some of those who had been excluded protested outside. The younger generation was particularly underrepresented, and one young writer told the press that the meeting was a &white-wash.⁸ Many of those who participated agreed that one meeting was not sufficient and that the debate must continue.

4.(C) The discussion both at this meeting and in the continuing email exchanges has been critical and forward leaning. In his intervention, writer Leonardo Padura Fuentes described the snowball effect of a few emails and the explosive reaction that unleashed an &earthquake of pain and indignation in the conscience and memory of Cuban artists.⁸ Padura characterized the UNEAC statement as not at all satisfactory, and far from ending the debate, was only the beginning. The need for an open and inclusive debate, he argued, was not limited to intellectuals but concerned the whole of Cuban society. In an open letter to Navarro, film producer Enrique Colina, advised that the intellectuals, debate should be televised and the emails published. Referring to television news program &Mesa Redonda,⁸ he commented &I don't care if the tables are round, square or rectangular,⁸ but the same criticism that is directed toward world issues must be directed internally toward domestic problems that cannot be blamed only on the U.S. embargo. Colina called for &the recognition of the inalienable right

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of citizens to demand accountability of their representatives,⁸ and concluded that &If there is a will for change, it will come progressively, through a delicate readjustment of internal forces, within and outside the Party, which obliges an honest and valiant contribution of intellectuals.⁸

5.(C) The intellectuals, debate was also the centerpiece at the weekly rollout on February 3 of a new book at the downtown bookstore of the Cuban Writers Union. The star of the February 3 event was none other than Desiderio Navarro, the organizer of the January 29 meeting and one of the leaders of this debate, whose book &The Cause of Things⁸ (&La Causa de las Cosas⁸) actually a collection of Navarro's essays from the past several years) was being presented. The audience was several times larger than usual for the Saturday morning event, leading it to be moved outside the normal location and onto the square of the tourist-packed Plaza de Armas. In attendance in the front row) also a first, according to regular attendees) were three Politburo members: Assembly President Ricardo Alarcon, official Havana Historian Eusebio Leal, and Minister of Culture Abel Prieto. (The three Politburo reps did not speak at the event.)

6.(C) Navarro and several philosopher/writers held the floor for over an hour. All remarks revolved around the place of intellectuals in contemporary Cuban society, with acerbic references to &negative periods in the past.⁸ Navarro was subtle but unmistakable in contrasting &those with power versus those with knowledge.⁸ With evident irony, he concluded that the two groups were not mutually exclusive, but that it was not easy for them to co-exist. The first chapter of Navarro's book is even more direct, denouncing in no uncertain terms the totalitarian mindset. Amcit journalist Gary Marx commented afterwards that despite the large turnout at the rollout, &almost no average Cuban⁸ is aware of the intellectuals, debate. The book, which was put

on sale after the event, sold out at the bookstore.

7.(C) Comment: The critical dialogue among intellectuals has been the buzz of the nomenklatura for weeks. Intellectuals are an isolated class, however, and it is true that few average Cubans are aware of the debate. One of our key cultural interlocutors sees it as a distraction, and is not confident that the intelligentsia would have the same courage in the face of government repression. Thus far, however, the government is tolerating, if not engaging this debate for the purpose of appeasing the intellectuals, while the intellectuals are vowing to continue pushing the limits.

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